

“Stories of War, Stories of Peace”

Rev. Mary Gear

Delivered Sunday, May 30, 2021

Reading: “The Last Soldier” by David M. Horst

I saw the parade pass by with the last soldier marching.

I saw politicians stand by not in pride, but in shame as they recited the names of the dead and admitted their failure.

I saw the marching band step in time to silence, no more hymns of glory could they play.

I saw mothers and fathers say, “No, I will not sacrifice my child on the altar of a nation’s pride.”

I saw flags no longer madly waved, but held in quiet reverence.

I saw the granite statues crack and crumble, symbols to the waste of war.

I saw the last soldier give his final salute and the trumpeter play taps one last time.

I saw the end of brutality and death.

I saw the graveyard flags turned to threads by the ceaseless wind.

Sermon/Homily

On May 5, 1868, General John A. Logan, leader of an organization for Northern Civil War veterans, called for a nationwide day of remembrance. Logan proclaimed, “The 30th of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers, or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village and hamlet churchyard in the land.”

Logan called it Decoration Day, and he chose the date of May 30 because it wasn’t the anniversary of any particular Civil War battle.

On the first Decoration Day, May 30, 1868, General James Garfield made a speech at Arlington National Cemetery, where 5,000 participants decorated the graves of the 20,000 Civil War soldiers buried there.

By the end of the 19th century, Memorial Day ceremonies were being held on May 30 throughout the nation. State legislatures passed proclamations designating the day of remembrance, and the Army and Navy adopted regulations for proper observance at their facilities.

After World War I the day was expanded to honor those who have died in all American wars. In 1971, Memorial Day was declared a national holiday by an act of Congress, and placed on the last Monday in May, creating a three-day weekend and unofficially marking the start of Summer.

This is one story about the origin of Memorial Day, courtesy of History.com and the US Dept. of Veteran's Affairs.

Here's another story:

During the Civil War, 257 Union soldiers who had been held in a Confederate prison camp in Charleston, South Carolina died there and were buried in a mass grave. On May 1, 1865, black residents of Charleston organized a May Day festival when they cleaned up the burial ground, enclosed and landscaped the gravesite, and erected an arch declaring the fallen Union soldiers "martyrs." Nearly 10,000 people, including 3000 children from newly formed freedmen schools, gathered to march, sing, and celebrate. The crowd of citizens was joined by Black clergy, white missionaries, former Union soldiers, and mutual aid societies, each following the ancient custom of bringing flowers to decorate the gravesites of fallen soldiers.

Historian David W. Blight describes the day this way:

"This was the first Memorial Day. African Americans invented Memorial Day in Charleston, South Carolina. What you have there is black Americans recently freed from slavery announcing to the world with their flowers, their feet, and their songs what the war had been about. What they basically were creating was the Independence Day of a Second American Revolution."

Blight goes on to acknowledge that this story did not seem to ignite a movement for a national holiday.

This past month we've been exploring the spiritual theme of story, the stories we tell, the stories we believe, the stories we dream, the stories we pass on to next generations. Stories about identity, bodies, creation, possibilities. Stories about the past, the present and the future. // The stories we tell matter. We tell stories and the stories tell us. As author Terry Pratchett said, "Change the story, change the world."

What is your story of Memorial Day? Do you remember those who were killed in war or who died while serving in the military? Do you remember those who have died? Is it your unofficial start of Summer?

This Memorial Day weekend, my family in Michigan will do what they have done for more than 80 years: they will tend the family graves. My mom and her brother & sister, my aunt & uncle, will gather at the cemetery. One of them will have purchased flowers to plant, they rotate that responsibility each year. It's been the same flowers for 80 years; red geraniums, white alyssum and purple ageratum (ag-er-a-tum). They will clear away the debris of Winter and they'll plant the flowers that will bloom through the Summer. Always the same flowers in the same places.

And, as they clear and dig and plant, they will tell stories and remember. They'll tell of their childhoods, their grandparents, and of large family gatherings. They'll tell of their parents; my grandfather who worked hard in the foundry bringing his family into the middle class and who died young. They'll tell of my grandmother, who loved to tell jokes, especially bawdy ones, and who had a wonderful laugh, that distinctive high cackle that I hear in my mother's laughter and that my husband says he hears in mine.

They will tell stories of those who served in the military and those who have died, now including some in their generation and younger. They will tell stories, laugh, cry, pray and remember, keeping the stories and the people alive. They will tend the graves and

they will tend the memories. And, they will look to the future, telling stories of their children, grandchildren, and now great-grandchildren. The connection of the past to the future.

In our nation this weekend, we tell stories of those who have died in service to our country. We tell stories of war. I despair that we continue to tell the story that supporting our troops means supporting war. I know from my own story and the stories of my family that supporting the troops means supporting peace. We continue to learn over and over that marching for peace can also mean supporting the people who serve in the military, who serve as part of their family history, out of a sense of duty, or as a way out of poverty.

It is often the stories of heroism, of action, that we honor on Memorial Day. And there are many stories of bravery, courage, compassion, and kindness. What if we were to tell stories that held the truth about war: that it is brutal, terrifying, and violent?

What if we were to tell stories of the heroism and courage of non-violent resistance? Stories about the courage of Mahatma Gandhi, of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others who face violence with non-violence?

In his five principles of non-violence, Dr. King wrote:

“Nonviolent resistance means neither cowardice nor passivity. Nonviolent resisters are not cowards but strong individuals; it takes strength to resist the use of violence....The method is passive physically, but strongly active spiritually. It is not passive nonresistance to evil, it is active nonviolent resistance to evil.”

Dr. King knew that peace can only come from justice, and we hear that cry in the Black Lives Matter movement today. No justice, no peace.

Please do not hear that I am not in support of honoring those who have died fighting for freedom and protecting our freedoms. What I am against is glorifying war. I am against

denying that we ask those who serve in the military to do immoral things in our name. I am against refusing to acknowledge the injury, mental, physical, spiritual, and moral injury, that veterans and active-duty people incur on our behalf.

I know that the seeds of evil live in each of us and that they sometimes erupt in violence. Seeds of greed that cause us to make power grabs and land grabs, that intrude on the rights and property of others, that oppress fellow humans, denying their humanity. I know there is a need for protection.

I also know that conflict is human. Whenever we live with others, whether it is two or seven million, there are bound to be different values, priorities, and preferences. Conflict is not a choice, how we respond to conflict is the choice. We can choose to respond by fighting; this is an instinct that has allowed us to survive and evolve enough to become who we are as a species now. We have evolved different parts of our brains that allow us to choose how we respond to conflict —to negotiate, to mediate, to resist without violence.

That is our spiritual work as outlined in our 6th principle: We affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. Our principles ask us to remember the ancient and modern stories of war, to learn from them, to clarify our values, and to use our deepest spiritual grounding to create the peace that comes from justice. Our principles ask us to create new stories.

It is our spiritual grounding that helps us remember that we are called to work for justice, that we can make a moral decision about how to respond to conflict, that we can work for peace within us, among us and beyond us. That we can create new stories to pass on; stories of bravery and courage, compassion, and kindness, all in service to peace.

Those who have died have never left; they live on in our memories and stories. This Memorial Day, I invite you to honor and remember, making the connection between the past and the future. Imagine what is possible in a world of justice and peace. Create a

new story and pass it on.

With the fire of imagination in our minds and hearts, let's hold a moment of silence together.